**How Action Conveys Theme**

First, look at an example of how the action of a poem—what happens in it—leads you to understand the theme.

**Finding Meaning in Literature Practice and Answers**

Read the following poem by William Blake from his book *Songs of Experience*, published in 1794. Read it out loud, because poetry is meant to be *heard* as well as read. Then read it again with your pen in hand: Read actively, making your observations and comments in the margins. Then answer the questions that follow.

**A Poison Tree**

I was angry with my friend;

I told my wrath, my wrath did end. *wrath* = *anger*

I was angry with my foe: *foe* = *enemy*

I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water'd it in fears,

Night & morning with my tears;

And I sunned it with smiles,

And with soft deceitful wiles. *wiles* = *trickery*, *deceit*

And it grew both day and night,

Till it bore an apple bright;

And my foe beheld it shine,

And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole

When the night had veil'd the pole: *veiled* = *concealed*

In the morning glad I see

My foe outstretch'd beneath the tree.

**Practice**

What happens in the first stanza?

1. The speaker was angry with
   1. a friend.
   2. a foe.
   3. a friend and a foe.
2. How did the speaker handle his anger toward his friend?
   1. He told his friend about it and it went away.
   2. He kept it to himself and it grew.
   3. He kept it to himself and it went away.
3. How did the speaker handle his anger toward his foe?
   1. He told his friend about it and it went away.
   2. He kept it to himself and it grew.
   3. He kept it to himself and it went away.

Now look at the second stanza. The key to understanding this stanza is knowing what *it* refers to. Reread the first and second stanzas carefully in order to answer the next question.

1. *It* refers to
   1. tears.
   2. smiles.
   3. wrath.

Now, given these clues (and the best clue of all, the title of the poem), to what exactly is the speaker comparing his wrath?

1. The speaker compares his wrath to
   1. a flower.
   2. a tree.
   3. the sun.

What else happens in the third stanza?

1. In the third stanza, the foe
   1. grows his own apple.
   2. shines the speaker's apple.
   3. sees the speaker's apple.

Finally, what happens in the fourth stanza? This stanza is somewhat trickier than the others, because in this stanza, something happens that is not directly stated. You know that the foe sneaks into the speaker's garden ("And into my garden stole"), but what else happens?

The poem doesn't exactly tell you, but you can guess. The speaker had an apple; you know that this apple grew on a tree and that this tree is a metaphor for the speaker's anger. You also know that the poem is called "A Poison Tree." You read in the fourth stanza that, in the morning, the speaker finds his foe "outstretch'd beneath the tree." What can you conclude?

1. At the end of the fourth stanza, the foe
   1. is waiting to ambush the speaker and kill him with the apple.
   2. has been killed by the apple he stole because it was poisonous.
   3. is waiting to share the apple with the speaker.

Okay, so that's what happened in the poem. But what does it all mean?

Look again at the action. What the speaker *did* was to tell his friend about his wrath. What the speaker *didn't* do was to tell his enemy about his wrath. The results of the speaker's action and his inaction are your clues to the meaning of the poem as a whole, its theme.

1. Which of the following best summarizes the theme of the poem?
   1. Don't steal; it can kill you.
   2. Choose your enemies carefully.
   3. If you don't talk about your anger, it can be deadly.

Before you go any further, think about your answer again. Like a main idea, a theme must be general enough to encompass the whole work, not just a piece of it. Does the answer you chose encompass the whole poem and not just part of it?

*From Reading Comprehension Success in 20 Minutes A Day. Copyright © 2009 by LearningExpress, LLC. All Rights Reserved.*